

Automatic Meter Reading (AMR)

Frequently Asked Questions

The City of Newton will be implementing an automatic meter reading project beginning in February, 2010. Old water meters will be replaced with new, more accurate water meters and connected to a radio transmitter to collect meter readings remotely. The City hired Elster AMCO Water, Inc. to supply new water meters and radio transmitters and to supply and install the AMR system. Vanguard Utilities Services, Inc. was hired by the City to install the new water meters and radio transmitters.

Why is the City installing new water meters?

- The majority of the existing water meters are over 26 years old and can no longer be read remotely by the City. The new meters will transmit the water meter reading directly to City hall and accurately report your consumption every day.

Will I still have to read my meter myself and report it to City Hall?

- No. The new water meter reading system is automatic, and can be read without residents having to report their usage.

When will the installations begin taking place?

- Installation of commercial water meters will begin in late February, 2010, and installation of residential water meters will begin in April, 2010.

Do I need to make an appointment to have my meter installed?

- Yes. You will receive written notification in the mail approximately 2 weeks before we are in your neighborhood. The notice will include a web-site and a local phone number that you can either access or call to make an appointment.

When are appointments normally scheduled?

- Appointments are usually scheduled during the hours of 8:00 AM to 6:00 PM, weekdays and Saturdays, or during other reasonable hours (8:00 AM to 8:30 PM) on any day with your consent.
- Please note that you can not schedule your appointment until you receive written notification to make the appointment.
- In some instances installations will occur based on door-to-door canvassing if the meter installers are in the neighborhood, but only with your approval.

What if I have not received notification to make an appointment?

- The installation for the entire City will take up to two years (January, 2012) to complete. The installation contractor has been given your existing meter information in order to schedule an appointment to replace your meter. The City will monitor the contractor to assure that your meter will be replaced.

Will workers need to enter my home in order to install the new meter?

- Yes, two persons will need to enter your home. One will be from the installation contractor, Vanguard Utility Service, Inc., and one will be a representative of the City to assure that proper standards are followed. The City representative will be from Weston & Sampson Engineers, Inc. Both workers will have proper identification. The City representative will also perform a building inspection of the basement or equivalent lowest level of the building. The purpose of this building inspection is to determine if sources of surface runoff or groundwater are improperly connected to the City's sewer system. These connections are not permitted under the Massachusetts Building and Plumbing Codes and the City's Sewer Use Ordinance.

How do I know that the people who come to my house are representing the City as part of this project?

- All personnel assigned to the project by the installer (Vanguard Utilities Service, Inc.) and the City's representative (Weston & Sampson Engineers, Inc.) shall wear an approved uniform with company logo and will have a conspicuously displayed picture identification badge, provided by the City of Newton.
- All vehicles used by these individuals will also be marked.
- Employees without proper uniform or identification will not be allowed to work. In addition, all installers are registered with the City of Newton Police Department.
- The Newton Police Department will also be notified of where the work is taking place prior to representatives entering a neighborhood.
- All installation employees have completed pre-employment drug and alcohol screening tests. In addition, a Criminal Offender Record Information (CORI) report pertaining to conviction and pending criminal data was obtained for all installation employees working on the project.
- If you ever have any question about the identity of someone who claims to be working on behalf of the City of Newton or Vanguard Utilities Services, Inc., please call the Vanguard Customer Call Center at 617-969-1038 during normal business hours from 8:00 AM to 8:00 PM or the 24-hour Emergency Call Center at 617-610-2927.

How long will it take for my meter to be installed?

- Once inside your home, each meter installation will take approximately 20-30 minutes. In some cases it might be determined by the City that the structural integrity of the pipe at your foundation wall will prohibit the installation of the new water meter. Should this be the case you will be contacted by the City of Newton Department of Public Works' Utilities Division on what measures will need to be taken in order to install the new water meter.

Do I need to be home for this appointment?

- Yes, or someone 18 or over. We can not enter anyone's home without someone being home. Call Vanguard Utilities Services, Inc. to schedule an appointment when you receive a notice that installers will be in your neighborhood. Please do not call until you receive a notice.

Will Vanguard Utilities Service, Inc. need to interrupt my water service?

- Yes, service interruptions will generally last less than a half hour.

What are the benefits of AMR?

- Improved customer service, including:
 - Minimizing the need to access your property to read your meter.
 - Call resolution improvement – billing calls will be handled more quickly due to availability of more frequent meter readings.
 - Leaks can be detected – Customers will be notified so leaks can be repaired proactively.
- Controlled meter reading costs.
- Fewer employee injuries, especially in areas with fenced yards, dogs and landscaping.
- Elimination of estimated bills.

How does AMR work?

- Using wireless radio transmitters, AMR remotely reads customer meters and then transfers the data into the billing system.
- AMR will drastically reduce the need for meter readers to manually gather utility meter readings.

What information will be transmitted?

- The modules transmit meter readings and the meter identification number. Diagnostic information is also transmitted to verify that the meter is operating correctly.

Is my account information secure?

- Yes, only meter readings and meter numbers are transmitted.
- Personal customer information will not be transmitted.
- The system uses technology that was originally developed by the US military for secure communications to keep your information private and secure.

Is this new system really needed?

- Yes. We strive to provide the best possible customer service, high reliability and billing accuracy. The AMR technology will help us achieve these goals. As water meters get older they become less accurate and need to be replaced.

Will the radio transmitter interfere with my television, cordless phone, garage doors or pacemaker?

- No, the radio transmissions occur on a frequency different from those used by television signals, cordless phones, garage doors, and pacemakers. In addition, the transmissions last less than one second.

Are there any potential health concerns with the radio signals?

- Studies made on low-power RF transmissions have revealed no negative health impacts.

Is this radio device a listening device used to listen to conversations in my basement or utility room?

- No. This is a device programmed only to transmit water usage.

What powers the AMR radio transmitter?

- The radio is a battery-powered device. The expected life of the battery is 20 years, which coincides with the expected life of a residential water meter.

Does this mean my bill will be increasing?

- Not necessarily. In some cases, your bill may increase, but only if your current meter is underreporting usage. Presently the majority of residents are paying for the water they are actually using, while a few residents are only paying for a fraction of the water. This condition is not fair to all residents. The new system will ensure fairness and equality for all the residents and businesses from this point forward.

What will this cost?

- There is no additional charge to you for the meter replacement/upgrade. The cost of the AMR system is included in your water and sewer rates.

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Will I see a change in my service after AMR is installed?

- The only significant change to your utility service will be that once the AMR system is operating, meter readers will not need to visit your property to collect the meter readings. Service personnel may visit the meter periodically to confirm proper operation or perform routine maintenance.

Do I need to maintain the AMR meters?

- No. The City of Newton will handle all ongoing maintenance of the equipment. Do not tamper with the devices. Do not bang on them or attempt to make adjustments. Teach children never to touch or play near utility equipment including the meters and radio transmitters. If you think something is wrong with the equipment, please call the Vanguard Customer Call Center at 617-969-1038 during normal business hours from 8:00 AM to 8:00 PM or the 24-hour Emergency Call Center at 617-610-2927.

Doesn't the upgrade work require a licensed plumber?

- In some rare instances where modifications to the existing plumbing are needed to change out the water meter, a licensed plumber will be required.

Isn't my water meter on the outside of the home?

- No, water meters are located within the homes to prevent freezing in the winter months. Some homes may be equipped with an outdoor reading device. Installers will be replacing the water meter inside your home and installing a new radio device on the outside.

Is this something I have to do?

- Yes, this is a mandatory meter replacement/upgrade. The City of Newton requires that all utility customers participate in the program. Failure to do so may result in utilities being shut off.

My meter has received the AMR technology upgrade. Why is a meter reader still taking readings from my meter?

- If your meter has been upgraded with the AMR technology and your meter is still being read manually it just indicates that we have not completed the AMR network in your area, and we are not yet ready to read your meter remotely. Once we are receiving radio readings from your meter, future readings will be collected remotely by the AMR network.

How do you know that my reading is accurate?

- This “state-of-the-art” meter reading technology uses electronic registers to collect the meter readings and a radio to send the data that have proven to be more accurate than visually reading the meter by removing the possibility for human errors. Also, each radio device has a unique identification number that is transmitted along with the meter reading. The unique identification number is compared electronically to your account record to ensure that the meter reading received matches the meter assigned to your account.

How long will it take to complete the project?

- The project is scheduled to be completed by January, 2012.

What will happen to my old water meter?

- Your old meter will be taken by the installation contractor and stored for 6 months and then recycled. This is done should there be any disagreements regarding prior water consumption.

Has this new AMR equipment been tested for accuracy and reliability?

- Yes, this equipment has gone through numerous tests for billing accuracy and system reliability.

What if I have more questions about the AMR implementation?

- You can contact the Vanguard Customer Call Center during normal business hours from 8:00 AM to 8:00 PM at 617-969-1038 or the Vanguard 24-hour Emergency Call Center at 617-610-2927.
- You can also contact the Newton Public Works Department at (617) 796-1640 during normal business hours from 7:00 AM to 3:00 PM.